**13 Artists On: Immigration**

By Zoë Lescaze

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*Art doesn’t just reflect the world — it engages with it. Some 10 million to 15 million undocumented*[immigrants](https://www.nytimes.com/topic/subject/immigration-and-emigration)*currently live in the United States, and their presence is the subject of fierce debate. So for the second installment of our series*[T Agitprop](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/29/t-magazine/charlottesville-art-robert-longo-toyin-ojih-odutola-sanford-biggers.html)*, we asked 13 contemporary artists — Alfredo Jaar, Raúl de Nieves and Hayv Kahraman among them — to submit works, many of them new and being published for the first time, in response to the subject of immigration. Here are their pieces and written statements.*

Image

Felipe Baeza's "Untitled (so much darkness, so much brownness)," 2016.CreditPortrait by René Fragoso. Artwork courtesy of the artist.

**Felipe Baeza**

*Born in Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico, in 1987.*

When we talk about progress in this country, there are groups that are always left out — often black people, working-class poor people and migrants. Through “Untitled (so much darkness, so much brownness)” and through my art practice, I aim to challenge the notions that keep marginalized people in the margins. I believe that art has a crucial role to play in transforming, redefining and reimagining the global phenomenon of migration. When it comes to migration, the discourse rarely focuses on the stories of real people trying to succeed; instead, the conversation is dominated by criminality and punishment.

I believe that when we share our images and tell our stories, we illustrate the human struggle — and this has the power to win over broad audiences. Art drives ideas home in a way that is unmatched by any other medium. We need multidimensional, complex stories about who we are; we need to represent ourselves in our full humanity. That is how we can combat racism and that is how we can achieve justice. But more importantly, that is how we reclaim our existence.

Raúl de Nieves's "Saint George and the Dragon," 2004. CreditPortrait and artwork courtesy of the artist.

**Raúl de Nieves**

*Born in Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico, in 1983.*

I have composed many paintings on the theme of St. George and the Dragon over the past 12 years. Its iconography has been the source of healing, strength and self-revelation. I am sharing one of my first depictions of St. George and the Dragon, as I believe the legend extends to our current political climate. In the midst of turmoil, disbelief and fear, I see archetypes like St. George reach beyond their cultural origins to invoke universal patterns of potentiality in the mind.

Tatyana Fazlalizadeh's "Portrait of My Father as an Alien," 2018.CreditPortrait by Texas Isaiah. Artwork courtesy of the artist.

**Tatyana Fazlalizadeh**

*Born in Oklahoma City in 1985.*

How we treat each other is based not only on our interpersonal interactions, but on how social and political structures inform our opinions ofpeople and subsequently how we treat or mistreat them. I’m curious about how the hateful rhetoric and policies of our current administration influence our impressions of immigrants. “Portrait of My Father as an Alien” is an oil painting based on his “resident alien” ID card photo from when he came to the United States from Iran in the 1970s. My intention was to take an image of him that was presented as “alien” to this country, and to view it with the understanding that he was a person — a father, a husband, a human being. It is essential to ask ourselves, how do we resist the dangerous narratives of immigrants that have been presented to us and instead see and uplift the humanity and rights of individuals?

Ramiro Gomez's "Turning the Tide (Inside Donald & Melania Trump's $100 Million NYC Penthouse),” 2018.CreditPortrait by David Feldman. Artwork courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W.

**Ramiro Gomez**

*Born in San Bernardino, Calif., in 1986.*

This is for the unrecognized people working behind the scenes, in solidarity with their struggle, acts of defiance and resilient spirit.

Kimsooja's “To Breathe – Zone of Nowhere,” 2018.CreditPortrait by Giannis Vastardis. Artwork © Kimsooja Studio.

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**Kimsooja**

*Born in Taegu, South Korea, in 1957.*

This work combines and transposes six national flags that, together, form a new transnational flag. They are layered in alphabetical order by country, including nations that are not internationally recognized, without hierarchy or political prejudice. The piece comes from the video “To Breathe – The Flags” (2012), a commission from the International Olympic Committee on the occasion of the London 2012 Summer Olympics, which depicts 246 flags of the participating nations dissolving in a continuous loop, their iconic designs morphing into one another. I wanted to present the flags as indistinguishable cross-pollinating visual symbols, to empty and reconfigure their purported intent — as symbols of state sovereignty and nationhood — in order to blur and transcend national borders. This work is a call for coexistence, for an ideal world in which individuals can unite in celebration of our distinctions and of our common humanity.

Alfredo Jaar's "Ellis Island, 2024," 2018, based on a photograph by Masahito Ono.CreditPortrait by Jorge Brantmayer. Artwork courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong, New York.

**Alfredo Jaar**

*Born in Santiago, Chile, in 1956.*

This photograph depicts Ellis Island as it might appear in 2024, completely transformed into a park with no traces of what exists there today. Ellis Island, a former inspection station that saw millions of immigrants to the United States pass through its doors during the 19th and 20th centuries, was once a beautiful symbol of solidarity and openness. With this image, I would like to suggest that the values represented by Ellis Island are vanishing before our eyes.

Hayv Kahraman's "Kurds," 2018.CreditPortrait courtesy of the artist. Artwork courtesy of the artist, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Jack Shainman and The Third Line.

**Hayv Kahraman**

*Born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1981.*

The placid mirage on a strip of the road reminded me of my country. For a moment I felt transported. The image of the desert spoke covertly of my past and future. It was as if temporality was absent. Two distinct spaces that in reality had declared war on one another, and yet here they were in front of me, indistinguishable. I caught myself suddenly and gained composure, reminding myself that I am in a land that was/is currently at war with my homeland.

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A warm, flickering beam of sunlight brushes my eye and I squint. The apparition of water conjures up childhood memories of driving from Baghdad to Al Habbaniya, and the time that I asked my dad about mirages. A mirage, he said, is a distant illusion of water created when hot air meets cool air. It’s not real. It only exists in your mind. Do we all see mirages? I asked. Yes, we all see them.

This shared perception of water makes me realize that, whether we are in the United States or in Iraq, we are all part of a collective species sharing one global platform where margins are consistently being negotiated and contested. Today I physically find myself on the other side of the line, struggling to keep my memories afloat. You have made it clear that I’m an “Other” but I refuse to be erased. This is my position as an immigrant and refugee yet I still share the same vision of water on the road as anyone else.

Patrick Martinez's "Notice No Soliciting," 2018.CreditPortrait by Sam Frost. Artwork courtesy of the artist.

**Patrick Martinez**

*Born in Pasadena, Calif., in 1980.*

I was thinking about the types of signs and sign systems that exist in communities throughout the United States. For example, “No Soliciting,” “No Trespassing” and “Beware of Dog.” I wanted to combine these types of signs, which clearly delineate territory, with the aesthetic of neon storefront signage commonly used in mom-and-pop liquor stores and markets to advertise goods and services.

This neon sign is meant to function as a visual deterrent to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the federal agency that is unlawfully entering peoples’ homes and unjustly arresting some of the occupants. Dozens of videos demonstrating the aggressive tactics deployed by ICE have surfaced online. In many cases, it has been reported that ICE agents have unconstitutionally harassed and arrested innocent people based on false information.

Empathy is necessary when dealing with issues surrounding immigration and the unfortunate types of circumstances that can force family members to leave their homeland. Immigration controversies often prevent us, as a nation, from examining uncomfortable social and cultural truths. Rather than using immigrants as scapegoats for issues related to crime or unemployment, we must call for social reform.

Aliza Nisenbaum's "Susan, Aarti, Keerthana and Princess, Sunday in Brooklyn," 2018. CreditPortrait courtesy of the artist. Artwork courtesy the artist; Mary Mary, Glasgow; Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery.

**Aliza Nisenbaum**

*Born in Mexico City in 1977.*

Five years ago, while volunteering at Immigrant Movement International, I decided to paint portraits of undocumented immigrants living in Queens, originally from Central America and Mexico. I find that in sitting and painting someone’s portrait from life, the attention you give one another — and the conversations that occur in the process — are unlike other ways in which we address each other. This activity requires trust and responsiveness to another’s materiality as you look at something as simple as the changing tonality of a person’s skin. The people in my paintings are largely invisible in the public sphere, sometimes by choice but mostly out of necessity. They are accustomed to avoiding the public eye, but the process of sitting for long sessions led my models to open up and share their life stories. In turn, they asked about my experience growing up in Mexico and my time here in the United States.

“Susan, Aarti, Keerthana and Princess, Sunday in Brooklyn” depicts a two-mother mixed-race family with two strong, joyful girls. Their collective heritage is Indian and African-American. They are a family that came together through adoption and New York City and are deeply committed to social justice and racial equality — both women have devoted their careers to advancing education and human rights. I initially met Susan in 2015 while completing a residency for Immigrant Women Leaders through the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs. This residency took place in honor of the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women and the resulting Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. I have painted the 15 women who participated in this residency together as a group, and individually. Susan is someone I admire deeply; we kept in touch over the years, and this painting is a result of our friendship.

Edel Rodriguez's “Strangers,” 2018.CreditPortrait by Deborah Feingold. Artwork courtesy of the artist.

**Edel Rodriguez**

*Born in Havana, Cuba in 1971.*

Boat people, that’s what many immigrants are considered. I was one of them, a refugee. I understand that welcoming strangers can be dangerous. Throughout history, many countries have sent their best, as well as their worst, to the United States. Irish gangs and the Italian Mafia, among many other criminal groups, flourished here soon after their arrival. We have always lived with the dangers of accepting foreigners, and we have always dealt with them, knowing that those are the risks a country must assume if it is to be a beacon to the entire world. This country now seems scared to take risks on foreigners, to bet on the possibility that the next boat full of strangers might be full of greatness.

Art Spiegelman's "A Warm Welcome," 2015. CreditPortrait by Phil Penman. Artwork courtesy of the artist.

**Art Spiegelman**

*Born in Stockholm, Sweden in 1948*.

I first saw the Statue of Liberty in October 1950 while perched high on my father’s shoulders. My parents, survivors of Hitler’s death camps, had been granted immigration visas to the United States, and all the passengers were crowded on the foredeck of the Gripsholm as we approached the harbor. I was less than 3 years old when my father excitedly pointed at the giant lady standing in the water to welcome us to New York. I was suitably awed until we got closer and was disappointed to see that she was “just” a statue.

I remember my mother reciting the Emma Lazarus sonnet inscribed on the statue’s base to me in my childhood as if it were liturgy: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free/The wretched refuse of your teeming shore/Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.” In the decades since, I had to learn how often Emma Lazarus’s sentiments have been betrayed by harsh immigration policies. ICE has scorched the dreams of many of the tempest-tost and these days actively betrays that inscription with a cruelty my parents had hoped they had left behind.

From Adrián Villar Rojas's series "Brick Farm," 2016.CreditPortrait by Panos Kokkinias. Artwork courtesy of Adrián Villar Rojas.

**Adrián Villar Rojas**

*Born in Rosario, Argentina, in 1980.*

The hornero is an Argentine bird species and national emblem. Its unique skill is to build mud nests with thick sturdy walls similar in shape to the mud ovens that were vital for countryside subsistence in several countries of South America until the 20th century. The hornero is regarded as a synanthropic species: a nonhuman being that lives in anthropogenic biomes and benefits from them. The construction time can be as short as seven days or as long as a few months. Other complex living entities such as mice and snakes reuse the abandoned nests.

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Since 2013, in an effort to start a glocal dialogue between this vernacular constructor and foreign fauna, flora and architecture, I have been collecting abandoned hornero nests in the city of Rosario — my hometown in Argentina — and reinstalling them in different spots of the planet under the same synanthropic logics applied by this bird. Trees, facades, posts and several hidden corners of cities such as Havana, Sharjah, Stockholm, New York, Athens, Riga and Anyang become the alien foundations of the birds’ unique adobe houses. As with many other migratory phenomena involving complex living entities, this project is meant to have no end.

Chan-Hyo Bae’s “The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels, Quinten Massys,” 2018.CreditPortrait courtesy of the artist. Artwork courtesy of Chan-Hyo Bae/Purdy Hicks Gallery, London.

**Chan-Hyo Bae**

*Born in Busan, South Korea, in 1975.*

When I was in Korea, I admired Western culture. After arriving in England, however, I began to realize that Western culture was not necessarily superior to Eastern culture and this brought on confusion about my identity. I came to feel that Asian men were not sexually attractive to Western women, that certain stereotypes exist, and that the East is perceived as feminine. That is why I decided to impersonate Western religious figures and English noblewomen in my photographs. This new piece is part of the series “Jumping Into,” in which I place myself within celebrated Western paintings held in the collection of the National Gallery, London. Here I appear in “The Virgin and Child Enthroned, with Four Angels” by Quinten Massys. In these works, I try to be British, just as children pretend to be their mothers by dressing in her clothes and making themselves up with her cosmetics. I am interested in this children’s language, in which they try to express their own existence by posing as another person. Becoming a British lady, which may seem gauche, is my language.